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# The Athanasian Creed.

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*SPEECH BY THE LATE MARQUIS OF  
SALISBURY.*

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IN view of the recrudescence of attacks on this venerable Symbol of the Catholic Faith, it may be interesting at this time to reprint the speech made by the late LORD SALISBURY at the great Meeting organized by the English Church Union and held at St. James's Hall on Jan. 31st, 1873.

THE MARQUIS OF SALISBURY (who was received with great cheering), said: The resolution which I have to move is—

That this Meeting earnestly deprecates, as fraught with danger to the preservation of Christian truth throughout the world, any mutilation of the Athanasian Creed, or any alteration of its status in the Book of Common Prayer.

The position of things with which we have to deal is this— an ancient Creed (which we now know dates from the sixth century) representing with exact fidelity the words and phrases of the greatest uninspired champion the Christian Church ever produced, round which the faith and devotion of thirty generations of Christians have entwined themselves—this Creed has come down to our time, and for the first time in the history of Europe it is proposed to offer an affront to it. We have to ask ourselves what are the reasons on which this course is taken, what are the grounds which can be alleged in its behalf, and

what are the dangers which it reveals? Of course, there have been many different courses proposed to be adopted with reference to this Creed. On the part of those who, partly from their own feelings, but I think more often with the desire of averting a supposed popular feeling which perhaps after all did not exist, complain of this Creed, a great variety of changes have been suggested; but in the main they have resolved themselves into two. One of them is that which has been unhappily supported by some Bishops of our Church, and which I am bound to say has commended itself undoubtedly to a few excellent men, and that is the mutilation of the Creed. To me that has always seemed the most inadmissible proposition that could possibly be made (cheers). There is not only that consideration upon which the chairman has so forcibly remarked, that this Creed is the inheritance of the whole Catholic Church, and no part of the Church can take upon itself to tamper with its words; but there is also the fact that these clauses, speaking of the retribution of guilty unbelief, only express a doctrine which is expressed with quite as much distinctness and force in other parts of the formularies of the Church. Until you can get rid of the Eighteenth Article, the one anathema which the gentle spirit of our Reformers allowed them to insert in the formularies of faith—the Article which states that “they are to be had accursed that presume to say that every man shall be saved by the law or sect which he professeth, so that he be diligent to frame his life according to that law and the light of nature,”—you will not get rid of the objection which these gentlemen feel to the warning clauses of the Athanasian Creed. Therefore the whole object which they have in view would not be met except by far more drastic measures than they venture to propose. I do not like to speak of the purely theological objections, for I know there are those coming after me who can dwell with a great deal more force than I can upon the terrible danger of teaching in this age of scepticism that dogma is a matter of small account, and that men may safely tamper with their faith. I do not dwell on that; but do not suppose I pass it by because I lightly regard its importance, but because I greatly regard my own incapacity to deal with such a theme. Look, then, at the matter in a

humbler but more practical view. If you propose in any way to alter or mutilate the Athanasian Creed, who is to do it? (cheers). Convocation will not (loud cheers). Then it must be done by the House of Commons ("oh, oh!"). Any one who has been privileged to hear the way in which discussions in committee, on any important proposition, are carried on in the House, will not feel that it will tend much to the advance of Christian edification if the highest doctrines of our faith are submitted to amendments and counter amendments, divisions and cross divisions, in that highly honourable, but somewhat combative, assembly (a laugh). Yet that is what you will be driven to if it is allowed for one moment that the Legislature of its own mind, and without any support or sanction from the Church, is to undertake the task, before which synods of Churchmen have shrunk, of framing new formulas of faith for the acceptance of the Christian Church. I, therefore, put aside the question of altering the Creed apart from theological objections. I put it aside as a thing that in the present constitution of the English Government, in the present relations between the Church and the State, it would be impossible to do. Then we come to the other proposition—the proposition which has the sanction of Lord Shaftesbury's name, and which was supported by a memorial he procured in the course of the summer. The proposal is that the Creed should be banished from the service of the Church—not, as I understand, dismissed altogether from the Church's consideration, but put upon a kind of retired list (laughter)—put, as a gentleman in the gallery observes, upon half-pay, and in that condition left upon the formularies of the Church. Now, have these 7,000 gentlemen who signed the memorial really asked themselves what their objection really is? It cannot be an objection to substance, because if it was an objection to substance it could not possibly have been signed by any clergy of the Established Church. We know that the clergy have all stated in the most solemn way, and so have many besides the clergy, that this Creed is most thoroughly to be received and believed, for it may be proved by most certain warrants of Holy Scripture; and we know that they are all not only pious but honourable men; and it is perfectly inconceivable that they should join in

an objection to the substance of that which they have pronounced to be perfectly consonant with Holy Scripture. But not only that—the very course they propose to pursue shows that they do not object to the substance of the Creed: because it is to be left among the formularies, only it is not to be recited in church; in other words, if they object to the substance, they are prepared to say that that may be announced to the world as the belief of a body of Christians which that body of Christians dare not say in the presence of Almighty God in church. That is an inconceivable proposition, and I think it is impossible to come to any other conclusion but that these 7,000 gentlemen—(A *Voice*: “3,000”)—these 3,000 gentlemen then—I beg their pardon for exaggerating their number—object to nothing but the form of the Creed. Well, now, I have read a great number of objections to the form of the Creed, I might almost call them cavils, and what has struck me in respect of them all is, that though they show much learning and great ingenuity, they are all marked by an utter want of breadth. They are the criticisms not of men accustomed to deal with large masses of mankind, but rather the fastidious criticisms of men accustomed to deal with literary productions. I was much struck with the fact that in this memorial of 3,000 there were several peers, many members of Parliament, and many persons well known in London, but there was a very beggarly array of churchwardens (cheers). There was, in fact, a large assemblage of the rich and educated, but of the other portions of the laity very little account seems to have been taken. I am not myself adverse in secular matters to a certain flavour of aristocratic doctrine, but I never dreamt of such Toryism as would imagine that the objections of peers and members of Parliament to an article of faith was more valuable than that of humbler laymen. But there is a lesson to be drawn from this peculiar proportion. It struck me on reading it that it was a proportion not dissimilar from that which St. Paul observed when he contemplated the ranks of the early Christian converts, and possibly for the same reason; but, at all events, it shows us that these criticisms and objections which are levelled at the Creed are not of a kind which can commend themselves to the broad



views of the mass of men. The mass of men do not understand these fastidious objections to mere form. They think of substance, and of substance only. They do not inquire whether this Article may be possibly offensive to the Greek Church. They do not ask whether that Article may represent a view of the Divine hypostasis later than the Nicæan: they do not enter into subtleties of that kind; but these broad facts are present to their minds—they know this Creed has come down through many centuries associated with the most sacred doctrines of the Christian Church; they know it was taken by the Reformers whose names they venerate, and from whose fellowship they would not be lightly parted, and put in the forefront in order to mark, at a moment when faith was sorely tried, the intensity of the adhesion of the Church of England to this, the foundation of our faith. They know that under the shadow of this Creed have rested minds as learned and hearts as holy as any Church has ever produced; they know that through the three centuries that have elapsed since this Creed was put into the common service of our Church numbers of men, generations of Christian men, certainly not less devoted and less holy than those amongst whom we live, have been perfectly satisfied to receive this Creed; and they now know that it has been attacked, in the first instance, mainly under the urgency and at the desire of men to whom all dogmatic teaching is an abomination. Well, then, if you give it up, do you imagine they will think it is on account of a criticism of mere form? Do you imagine they will not see the substance behind the form, and that they will not conclude that the Church that deserts a position that has been held so long is really indifferent to the doctrine which that Creed contains? I am astounded, I confess, at the levity with which many men seem to have regarded the effects that will follow from the course which they recommend with respect to this Creed. They seem to imagine that tender consciences are all upon one side. They seem to think that a man may be very sensitive to words in a Creed which he thinks are too strongly expressed, but that it is impossible that any man should be sensitive if an affront is put upon the main article of the faith which he holds. That is the danger which we have to fear. There are two

courses which may be pursued. It is barely possible that Parliament may interfere with this Creed ; it is barely possible that the Church may give it up (" never, never "). If Parliament were to interfere with it the evil would be very great. Supposing it were to remove the Creed from the Prayer Book and prohibit its use in church, I fear that the prohibition would be disregarded (great cheering) in such a vast number of instances that Parliament would be puzzled to execute its own decrees. If, on the other hand, the option, as it is called, of abandoning it were given, it would introduce a new parting line into the Church, a new cause of bitterness and antagonism between parish and parish, new controversies, new acrimonies, new sources of paralysis to the efforts by which alone religion and civilisation can be carried into the masses of ignorance with which we have to deal. But the interference of Parliament would be a far lighter evil than the possible submission and desertion of the Church. It is a small matter comparatively that consciences would be wounded, and deep resentments would be excited, and probably a formidable schism would be created ; it is a small matter compared with that frightful evil that men would come to look upon the Church as having deserted her sacred mission, and having sunk, in their minds, to the level of those Protestant communities abroad—at Geneva and in Paris—where the faith which the Athanasian Creed proclaims has been openly abandoned. Such a result might have been obtained by the help of those scrupulous consciences whom we respect, though we regret their efforts ; but it would not be the scrupulous consciences that would reap the ultimate results. Behind the thin line of scrupulous consciences we see the vast forces of unbelief. The scrupulous consciences would win the battle ; the forces of unbelief would gather the spoils of victory (great cheering). But I need not pursue that theme. I feel that it cannot be (renewed cheers). I am sure that the experience of the last few months has taught Churchmen and politicians alike that this is not a subject to be lightly tampered with. I feel certain, at least, of this—from all that in public or in private I have seen, that if at this time, and at such a bidding, under such threatening circumstances, with infidelity raging around our walls—if this standard of our faith

is in any degree resigned, it will not be by the will or with the consent of the Church, but it will be done by external forces alone; and that to the end the Church will be faithful to the heritage that has been handed down to her from olden times (loud cheers).

Another noteworthy feature of this great meeting was the reading of the following letter written to the Rev. Canon MACCOLL by the Rev. CHARLES KINGSLEY :—

Eversley Rectory, Winchfield, January 31.

DEAR MR. MACCOLL—I am, to my regret, unable to be present at the Meeting to-night. But I cannot let it pass without asking leave to express my strong sympathy with its object.

I have long held that the general use and understanding of the Athanasian Creed by the Church of England would exercise hereafter (as it has exercised already) a most potent and salutary influence, not only on the theology, but on the ethics, and on the science, physical and metaphysical, of all English-speaking nations.

I believe that that influence was never more needed than now since the great French Revolution of the last century; and I am therefore the more jealous at this moment of the safety of the Athanasian Creed.

I feel for, though I cannot feel with, the objections of many excellent persons to the so-called Damnatory Clauses. But I believe that those objections would die out were the true and ancient Catholic doctrine concerning the future state better known among us; and therefore, in the event of an explanatory rubric being appended to the Creed in our Prayer Book, I should humbly pray that it may express, or at least include and allow, that orthodox and salutary doctrine.—Believe me, yours, with sincere good wishes,

CHARLES KINGSLEY.

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